

(21)
A SOBER
LETTER,

Touching

Predestination

A N D

O B D U R A T I O N.

Sent to a

MINISTER

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The City

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BRISTOL.



L O N D O N

Printed for *Jonathan Robinson*, at the *Golden Lyon*,
in *St. Paul's Church-yard*. 1 6 7 9.

145 (21)

LETTER

TO

THE

MINISTERS

OF

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Printed for R. B. Johnson, at the Golden Age
in the West, Chesham, 1872.

A SOBER
LETTER,
 TOUCHING
 PREDESTINATION
 AND
 OBDURATION.

Self. I.

Sir,

Although the Doctrine of God's Eternal *Predestination* be an offence to many, some abuse it to carnal liberty, and others to despair; yet it is a necessary and useful Doctrine, which upon all occasions ought to be uttered with much *reverence* and *circumspection*, to the praise and glory of God (as the same is held forth in the sacred Scriptures) without some *taste* of this *Divine Doctrine of Predestination*, there can be no true Faith; but either a doubtful and wavering Opinion leading to Despair, or else a vain presumption of feigned Holiness, whilst men rest upon their own Works and Performances, and not upon the Free Grace of God. There is no Doctrine that doth more beat down the pride

of the Flesh, that doth more exalt the Riches of God's Grace, or more establish and support the Saints in the Assurance of the Love of God, than this Doctrine of God's Eternal *Predestination*, if rightly apprehended and improved. The Scripture doth usually alledge the Eternal Purpose and Decree of God for strengthening and confirming our Faith and Hope of Salvation; and doth not rest in second Causes, or in the Fruits of our Faith and Vocation; but ascendeth up to Christ himself: In whom (as in the Head) we are elected and predestinated to Grace and Glory: Yea, it raiseth us up to that everlasting Purpose and Decree which was in God himself before the Foundation of the World, *Ephes.* 1. 4, 5, *Marth.* 11. 25, 26. *Rom.* 8. 29, 30. *Rom.* 9. 11, 16, 18, 23. 2 *Tim.* 1. 9. 2 *Tim.* 2. 19. 1 *Pet.* 1. 20.

SECT. 2.

As in other Points of *Divinity*, so more especially in this great Mystery of *Predestination*, we should avoid vain and curious Questions and Speculations; using such words and expressions concerning the same, as are most agreeable to the *Holy* Scriptures (for who so fit to reveal the mind of God in this great Mystery as God himself?) and not according to our corrupt fancy and imagination. In this case 'tis best and safest for us to ascend from the lowest degrees to the highest, as *St. Paul* doth in his Epistle to the *Romans*: speaking first of the Law of God, and the Corruption of Man's Nature; and so proceeding on to the Remission of Sins, and Justification by Christ; and from thence, to the sublime Mystery of God's Eternal *Predestination*. Whether we go up from the lowest step to the highest, or descend from the highest to the lowest, we must take heed that we run not from one Extreme to another; omitting and passing by the middle Causes or Means of Salvation and Damnation; which ought to be duly considered and placed between God's Eternal Decree, and the final Execution thereof. Nor should the Decree of *Præterition* or Reprobation be applied to any Sinner in (particular) so long as he lives, without special extraordinary Revelation, seeing God (whose Grace and Mercy is infinite and boundless) may call and convert him, even at the eleventh hour, though

though his sins be never so great and hainous. 'Tis observable, that all those *Acts* in God, which, in the matter of *Reprobation*, go befor sin, are described, rather after a *negative*, than positive manner in the Scripture; as the *Not writing their names in the book of life*. Rev. 13. 8. *They are not found written in the book of life*. Rev. 20. 15. *Ye are not of my Sheep*. Joh. 10. 26. *I never knew you*. Matth. 7. 23. *The Election hath obtained it, the rest* (i. e. those who are not elected) *were blinded*. Rom. 11. 7.

Sect. 3.

God's Decree of *Reprobation* is not the cause of sin, but Man himself is the cause of sin; Eccles. 7. 29. Ezek. 36. 31, 32. Jam. 1. 14. *Reprobation* being part of the Decree, and the Decree nothing else but God himself decreeing, cannot be the cause of sin: which is so contrary to God (who is *Holiness* it self.) His Decree may be said to be the *Antecedent* of Sin, and Sin to be the *Consequent* of the Decree, not the Effect of the Decree. Upon this occasion, we should always remember that approved distinction between a proper Cause, and an Antecedent: Life is the *Antecedent* of death, and sight of blindness. And, as it is impossible that there should be *Death* where there hath not been *Life*, or *Blindness* where there hath not been *Sight* foregoing; so it is as impossible, that either *Life* should be the cause of *Death*, or *Sight* the cause of *Blindness* following. God willeth not Sin as Sin; therefore *Reprobation* is not the cause of Sin: God willeth the *Permission* of Sin; therefore *Reprobation* is the *Antecedent* thereof. For the better guiding and regulating our Judgments in this great point, we must consider three distinctions. 1. Between God's Willing Sin as Sin, and his Willing the being; or *permission*; or the ordering of Sin for the Glory of Divine Justice and Mercy. 2. Between a Cause and an *Antecedent*. 3. Between a *Consequent* and an Effect.

Sect. 4.

Sin is the cause of Punishment and Damnation; God punisheth

eth no man; condemneth no man, but for Sin; *Original*, or *Act*ual, or both; *Gen.* 2. 17. *Rom.* 5. 12. *Ezek.* 18. 20, 25, 28. Though *Sin* be not the Cause of the Decree of God (for that which is temporal cannot be the cause of that which is *eternal*) yet it is the only proper cause of Punishment and Damnation. We must distinguish between God's Decree of *Non-Election*, or Reprobation, and his destinating men to punishment, or preparation to punishment; which is usually called *Predestination*. As for the former, it dependeth solely upon the sovereign Will and Pleasure of God: but the latter is an *Act* of God's Justice. The one floweth from God, as he is a God of absolute Power and *Sovereignty*; the other floweth from God, as he is a God of *Justice*. The Decree of Election and Reprobation is an *Immanent* Act in God alone, as in the Subject; and from God alone, as from the Original Cause. But Damnation is neither originally from God, nor subjectively in God; but is a *transient* Act of his Justice. God being infinitely wise, propoundeth to himself the Manifestation of his own *Glory*, as a most certain and infallible *End*; appointing and making all things to be *subservient* thereunto: *The Lord hath made all things for himself; yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.* *Prov.* 16. 4. And thus the Decree of God is described by the learned Bishop *Usher*, and other Protestant *Divines*, to be that *Act* whereby God, from all *Eternity* (according to his Free Will) did, by his *unchangeable* Counsel and Purpose, fore-appoint, and certainly determine of all things; together with their *Causes*, Effects, Circumstances, and manner of Being, for the *Manifestation* of his own *Glory*. Nor should we go about to subject this *Divine* Decree to our *shallow* Capacity, or measure it by our depraved Reason; considering that the *Will* of God (from whence the Decree cometh) is unsearchable. 'Tis true that all things come to pass *necessarily*, according to God's Eternal Decree; they shall not come to pass in any other place or time than he hath ordained. But yet this Decree of God doth not infer a necessity of *Constraint*, but only of *Immutability*: nor doth the Decree take away, either *Liberty* from the reasonable Creatures, or *Contingency* from second Causes; but only brings them into a certain order, that is, directeth them to the determined *End*: whereupon the Effects

fects and *Events* of things are contingent or necessary, as the nature of the second Cause is: Thus Christ (according to the *Divine Decree*) died necessarily; *Act. 4. 28. Act. 17. 3.* But yet willingly. If we respect the *Temperature* of Christ's Body, He might have lived longer: and therefore, in this respect, May be said to have died *contingently*.

Self. 5.

The Doctrine of God's Eternal *Predestination* (rightly understood) is so far from being a prejudice or hindrance to the Use of Means tending to Holiness and Sanctification, as that the use of the Means is the proper Effect and Fruit of the Decree of God: the right Knowledge and Consideration whereof is a most effectual Motive to a constant and conscionable use of the Means. And therefore, that is a most wicked Speech (which implyeth a mere Contradiction) If I be elected, howsoever I live, I shall be saved: And if I be not elected, live I never so well, I shall be damned. Satan, by this wicked Suggestion, divides the End and the Means asunder, which God hath joyned together. The Decree of God consists not only of the End without the Means, nor of the Means without the End; but of both together. *God having chosen us to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the Truth. 2 Thesl. 1. 13.*

Self. 6.

The *Command* and Invitation of God in the preaching of the Gospel, is the Rule of our Faith and Obedience; and not the *secret Decree* of God. Nor must we confound the Decree of *Predestination* with the Precepts of Faith and Obedience: God's revealed *Preceptive Will* shews what the Lord approves (as good in it self) and what ought to be performed by us: Not that every one that hears the Gospel preached, shall have *Effectual Grace* to perform it; but yet it is the duty of every one to repent, and believe on Jesus Christ, and obey the Voice of God in the *Dispensation* of his Gospel! The Doctrine of *Predestination* (as set forth in the Scriptures) is commanded to be taught and!

and learned ; and being soberly and wisely handled, is very useful, both to the Godly and the Wicked. But the *personal* Application thereof before Faith, in point of *Election* ; or, during this Life, in point of *Reprobation* ; is unwarrantable, and many ways hurtful. And truly, it is a great Sin against the Grace and Mercy of God in the *Gospel*, for any man or woman to conclude that he or she is a *Reprobate*, because final Unbelief and Disobedience (the Consequent of Reprobation) cannot be known before Death. No man knoweth who are *reprobate* but God, and those to whom God revealeth it in his Word. But the *Reprobation* of any particular person (now living) is not to be found in the Scriptures, nor is it revealed in an ordinary way to us.

Self. 7.

All the Elect of God, *first* or *last*, shall truly believe on Christ, and be converted to him (Saving Faith being the Effect or Fruit of Election.) *All that the Father hath given to Christ, shall come to him.* Joh. 6. 37. Joh. 10. 36. *Whom he did predestinate, them he also called.* Rom. 8. 30. *The Election hath obtained it.* Rom. 11. 7. *And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.* Act. 13. 48. *It is called the faith of God's Elect.* Tit. 1. 1. *It is according to Election.* Rom. 11. 5. In which respect, 'tis as certain, that all the Elect of God (though many of them are yet Unbelievers) shall believe and be saved, as it is certain that they are saved who are already in *Heaven*. As for others, God (who may do with his own what he pleaseth) justly witholds from them *Grace* to cure their Unbelief and *Impenitency* : *To them it is not given.* Matth. 13. 11. *Moral Impenitency, and Enmity of Man's Will against God, is common, both to the Elect and Reprobate (they being alike sinful and corrupt by Nature :) only God is pleased to cure the one, and not the other, of their Natural Unbelief and Impenitency. Touching the latter sort, God may be said to be the Physical Cause (not of their Unbelief, but) why their Unbelief remains uncured : As a Physician, able to cure a Disease (which yet he is not bound to cure) is the cause, not of the Disease it self, but why the*

the Disease is not cured : yet is he not the Moral and Blameable, but the Physical and unblameable Cause thereof, because he is not bound to cure it. This Cure cannot be effected in the Unregenerate; only by outward Means, without the *Internal* Efficacious Operation of the Spirit of God. The *Israelites* had seen with their Eyes the great Signs and Myracles which God had wrought for them : yet withal, it is said, that God had not given them a heart to perceive, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear, unto this day : Deut. 29. 3, 4. that is, he had not cured them of their Spiritual Blindness and unbelief, by the inward Illumination and Operation of his Spirit : for, as *Augustine* saith well, * *Though God afford never so great patience (in respect of outward Means) yet, unless God give Grace, who can truly repent of his Sins?* And this Grace he gives to one, and not to another, according to his good pleasure. The blessed Apostle, in answering that great Objection, *Rom. 9. 19.* Why doth God yet find fault with the Hardness and Rebellion of Man's heart, seeing no Man can resist the Divine Will, nor can he cure himself of this hardness of heart? hath recourse for satisfaction (not to the ill desert, and sinfulness of Man, but) to the Sovereignty and Dominion of God over his Creatures; which surely is as great and absolute, as that which the Potter hath over the Clay; who maketh Vessels of what fashion he will, and for what end he will. So, God hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth : and who art thou, O Man, that replyest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus? It becomes not the Creature to quarrel with God, or dispute with him concerning this matter (though the Creature cannot comprehend the reasonableness thereof.) This may well satisfy and silence us; that the Apostle doth not go about to justify God's Courses (here mentioned) from the Consideration of Man's Sinfulness, but only from the Consideration of God's Sovereignty, and Supreme Dominion over his Creatures. And, as God freely gives the Grace of Faith and Repentance to some Men, and not to others, to raise them out of Sin; so God gave corroborating, confirming Grace to some Angels; and not to others, to preserve them from Sin;

*Quantum libet
prebueris patientiam, nisi Deus
dederit quis agat
penitentiam?
Comr. Julian, 1.
1. g. lib. 5. c. 7. 4.*

according to the Sovereignty of his Will, without reference to their desert. This Grace God granted to the *elect* Angels; who has one of the *Amiens* duly observes) were, *Amplius adiuti*, more assisted by the Grace of God than the other that fell: and what *reason* can be alledged for this, but merely the absolute Sovereignty, and free Pleasure of God? And here we must acquiesce after all our vain and tedious Disputes. Behold, in this thou art not just, God is greater than Man, why dost thou strive against him; for he giveth not account of any of his matters. Job 33. 12, 13. Wilt thou condemn him that is most just? Is it fit to say to a King, thou art wicked? How much less to him that accepts not the persons of Princes, nor regardeth the rich more than the poor? Job 34. 17, 18, 19. Yea, indeed, this great God (who governs all persons and things) is most just; his Will being the eternal Rule of Righteousness. Justice may be considered two ways; the one is, when things are carried towards Men, according to their Works. The other is, when a Man doth no other thing than he hath power to do; as in executing the power that God hath given him over the inferior Creatures. Thus we are just, though we kill Sheep or Oxen, &c. not in reference to any Works of theirs; but only in reference to our own necessary use, and that lawful power which God hath given us, to make use of these Creatures, and to serve our own turns of them. And thus, God is not unjust or unrighteous, but most righteous and just in shewing Mercy on some, and not on others; in giving the Grace of Faith and Repentance to some, and not to others, when there is no difference between them.

Sect. 8.

It is the great duty and Concernment of all those persons to whom the Gospel is preached; be they rich or poor, noble or ignoble, learned or unlearned, moral or prophane, to deny themselves, and believe on Christ for everlasting Life and Salvation, without questioning the secret Eternal Decrees and Purposes of God concerning them in particular. When Men are in danger of drowning, if a Rope be cast out, with a Command that they should lay hold on it for their safety, will any of them be

so foolish as to neglect the means of their safety, till the secret purpose and meaning of him that cast out the *Rope* be particularly known concerning them? Or if a *rich* Man throw Money amongst the *Poor*, requiring them to accept of it; will any of them refuse it, till he certainly know the secret intent and purpose of the rich Man concerning him in particular? Although the Gospel doth not expressly signify, that this or that Man shall, in the *Event*, actually believe on Christ, and be saved; yet the Gospel makes known to the Sons of Men, that it is their duty to accept and embrace the Lord Jesus, as he is freely offered to Sinners; and that whosoever will be justified and saved, must believe on him: *He that hath the Son hath life, but he that hath not the Son hath not life: He that believeth on Christ shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned.* Faith and Salvation are so indivisibly joyned together, that wheresoever the one is, there the other necessarily and infallibly followeth. Consider, 1. That where God affords the means of Grace, there the outward Dispensation of the Gospel is alike to all, both *Elect* and *Reprobate*: We *invite*, we *woo*, we *intreat* all to come in, and be reconciled to God, not knowing in particular who are elect or reprobate in respect of the Eternal Decrees of God; we offer Christ freely to all that will come: *Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*, Rev. 22. 17. Christ is tendered as an All-sufficient Saviour to all that hear the Gospel, with a Command to believe; and a promise that, *Whosoever* (none excepted) *believeth, shall be saved.* And though none can savingly believe without God's Special Grace, yet all those that finally reject this Tender of the Gospel are left without excuse. 2. As none of us are expressly mentioned by Name in the Gospel, so neither are we excluded by Name. There we find, that Christ died for the world, for sinners, for the Ungodly, for Enemies. Rom. 5. 6, 8, 10. Joh. 3. 16, 17. 1 Tim. 1. 15. 1 Joh. 2. 2. Which words are comprehensive, and will take in all sorts of sinners that will heartily receive and embrace the Lord Jesus. Him that cometh to me (saith our blessed Saviour) I will in no wise cast out. Joh. 6. 37. And what though our sins be exceeding great and heinous, yet let us remember, that forgiveness and pardon of all sins (of what number or nature soever they be) is freely offered and promised

to every one that shall *cordially* accept thereof. So that it matters not so much, what our Sins have formerly been, as whether we are *now* heartily willing to close with Jesus Christ, for pardon of, and power against Sin. 3. We cannot perform a more *acceptable* Service and Obedience to God, than to believe on Christ, and heartily embrace the offer of his Grace (as being poor, lost, condemned Sinners in our selves) *Joh. 6. 29. Without this, all other works are but dead works.* Heb. 9. 14. Heb. 11. 4, 5, 6. *He that believes not, doth what he can to make God a liar.* 1 Joh. 5. 10. *And he that believes on the Son of God, sets to his seal, that God is true,* Joh. 3. 33. 4. Such as have truly repented of their Sins, and do cast and roul themselves (in the sense of their own unworthiness) upon the *perfect* Righteousness and Merits of Christ (as held forth in the Promises of the Gospel) have the witness in themselves of their *Election, Justification and Adoption*, and are free from the danger of *Reprobation* and final *Obduration*; though at present they are sensible of, and do groan under much *hardness* of heart and corruption. 'Tis God that justifies, 'tis Christ that died for them: Who therefore shall condemn them? who shall lay any thing to their charge? Rom. 8. 1, 32.

Señ. 9.

Whereas God is often said in Scripture to *harden* the hearts of Men, *Exod. 4. 21. Exod. 9. 16. Deut. 2. 30. Rom. 9. 18.* Certainly God doth not *harden* Men's hearts (as *Augustine* rightly observes) *Infundendo Malitiam*, but *Non Infundendo Gratiā*: 'Tis not by *infusing* any *evil* into the heart, but by withholding, and not communicating his *Grace* to it. As the *Water* is congealed and frozen by the absence of the *Sun*: how? not by imparting coldness, but by not imparting heat and influence. *Hardness* of heart, as it is Sin and Rebellion against God, so God hath nothing to do with it; but it must be put upon the Score of *Satan*, and the Corruption of Man's Nature. God *hardeneth* not the hearts of his *own* people as he *hardeneth* the *Reprobates*: for though he *hide* his *face*, and suspend the comfortable *Influences* of his Spirit from them for a *moment*, to try and humble them under the Sense of their Corruption; yet with everlasting kindness

ness he will embrace them; *Isa.* 54. 8. God is said to harden in withdrawing his Grace, and ordering and disposing even Men's evil Actions to that *end* which he hath propounded to himself, and in using the means which the Corruption and *Malignity* of Man's heart and nature perverteth to his own destruction. Thus God, in his wise Providence, ordereth and overruleth the *Action* of Hardning, but Man himself is the Cause of the *Obliquity* and sinfulness of the Action. In Scripture we find that God *hardeneth*, Satan *hardeneth*, and *Man* *hardeneth* his own heart: *Man* as the instrument, Satan as the Worker and *Efficient*; God as the *Supreme* Judge, over-ruling every Action, and disposing of it to his own Glory, either in a way of Mercy or *Justice*. As in a *Ship*, Man is as the *Mariner* that worketh; Satan the evil Spirit, as the Wind and Weather that tempteth and moveth; and God as the *Steers-man*, that directeth and governeth all. Like as then the *Sun* hardneth the Clay, and the *Rain* brings forth Weeds, not of it self, but by reason of the Nature of the *Soil* which it influenceth: So, by the Providence and *Operation* of God, after a most secret (yet just and holy manner) the *hearts* of wicked men come to be hardened more and more; but the only *culpable* Cause thereof is in themselves, and in the Corruption of their Nature, and not in God.

Self. 10.

Hardness of heart is either natural and inbred (which we bring with us into the World) or else it is *acquired* and voluntary: and this is an extinguishing of that common *Light*, and Knowledge, and Ingenuity which is in Men; whereby they make their hearts as *hard* as an *Adamant* Stone, and wilfully estrange themselves from God; or else it is an Additional Hardness inflicted by the just hand of God upon them, as a punishment of their Sin: Thus God *hardned* the hearts of *Pharaoh* and others, giving them up to a reprobate sense, and the vile lusts of their own hearts. *Rom.* 1. 24, 28. Again, Hardness of heart is either *felt* or not *felt*. The Reprobate (who is given up to hardness of heart, and *searedness* of Conscience) is not sensible of that *dreadful* spiritual Judgment which he lies under, nor doth he *bewail* it: but

but hardness *felt*, when a Man sees and feels, with grief and sorrow, the deadness, and hardness, and *benumbedness* of his own heart, which doth not *relent* (as it should do) at the threatenings and promises of God; nor is it *thawed* and melted with the Mercies and Loving Kindnesses of God: such a *sensible* hardness is incident to God's own Children; who often complain of it, and groan under it, as a great and heavy burthen. O Lord (say they) *why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our hearts from thy fear.* Isa. 63. 17.

Self. II.

Are we *sensible* of the hardness and *stonyness* of our hearts? and would we be cured of this great Evil? Then 1. Let us diligently search and examine whether we do not *indulge* our selves in some secret Sin or other; which being *unrepented of*, will *harden* the heart. 2. Let us *consider* the greatness and *goodness* of that Divine Majesty, against whom our hearts are *hardened*: this will be a *means* to soften them. Deut. 10. 16, 17, 18. Job 23. 15, 16. Psal. 95. 3, 8, 9. 2 Chron. 30. 8, 9. 3. Above all other things, let us *meditate* on Christ crucified, and lay our hard and frozen hearts before the *hot* Beams of the *Sun* of Righteousness. Mal. 4. 2. that they may sensibly feel the *force* of his gracious influence; and so, looking up to him by Faith (whom we have pierced with our Sins,) we may thereupon *melt* and *mourn* for our sins, as one that mourns for his only child. Zach. 12. 10. 'Tis observed of the *Diamond* (whose extreme *hardness* cannot be melted, either by the force of Iron, or the violence of the Fire) that if it be steeped in the *hot* blood of a Goat, it presently dissolves. The Iron Hammer of the Law will not *melt* and *soften* our hard and stubborn hearts; but if, by true Faith and Meditation, we *bath* and *plunge* them in the precious Blood of the true *Scap-goat*, the Lord Jesus Christ, this will break and *melt* the heart (though it be as hard as an *Adamant*.) The sacred *Blood* of the Physician *cures* the Disease of the Patient.

O rare Physician; thou that shedst thy Blood,
And gav'st thy Life to do poor Sinners Good.

F I N I S.